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Peeling off the skin: Antony Gormley's *Inside Australia*

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Keywords

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Abstract

In 2003 the Perth International Arts Festival celebrated its 50th anniversary with a commission given to renowned British artist Antony Gormley (1950 –). Gormley's *Inside Australia* is an installation of 51 stainless steel figures situated on Lake Ballard, a dry salt lake in a remote region of Western Australia. His initial attraction to the project was the geology and geography of Australia's interior but when he discovered the small community of Menzies, Gormley's ideas evolved towards an exploration of two separate concepts of interior space: one within us, the other embodied in the land. Using computer technology, Gormley made digital scans of most of the inhabitants of Menzies, reduced their lateral dimensions by two thirds and made statues based on these measurements in cast stainless steel. In the 'chemical' landscape of Lake Ballard, the *Insiders* resonate with the landscape and suggest a number of associations with indigenous art, community and culture. They promote a spiritual interaction with the landscape of interior Australia and in Gormley's words are 'an excuse for coming here and thinking about this place and the people who dwell in it'. A year later, *Inside Australia* remains in situ and there are plans to make it permanent. It promises to be another destination in the outback offering the tourist a spiritual pilgrimage into Australia's interior.

To see the desert is like peeling the skin off a landscape – Fred Williams¹

In December 2002 Antony Gormley placed an installation of 51 *Insiders* in a remote location in the interior of Western Australia. Gormley's *Insiders* are human forms scanned and cast in stainless steel alloy in a way that enables us to see them and ourselves, stripped down and reduced to essential cores of being (figure 1). The figures in their setting are a marriage of sculpture and landscape, a conflation of two concepts of the interior, one within us, the other embod-

ied in the land. The idea, Gormley explains, was to deal 'with issues about individual and community, the relationship of identity to the place, and the idea of who I am and how that's constituted by others'.² But he admits that what initially made him agree to the project was the ancient geology of Western Australia:

These Archean rocks are between 2.5 and 2.9 billion years old ... In these rocks are to be found an enormous wealth of mineral deposits – uranium, iron, copper, and stranger, more recently arrived elements on the elemental table – iridium, vanadium, molybdenum and



Figure 1 Antony Gormley, *Insider on Lake Ballard*, Western Australia, 2003, stainless steel alloy. © the artist 2003. Photograph by Simon Pierse

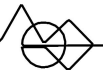
titanium. I wanted to make a new alloy based on high-grade stainless steel 316 that includes as many of these new elements as possible, a kind of concentration of the elemental memory in these very old rocks ...The idea of the piece is to provide a human measure for this geological landscape that allows viewers to walk out and sense their own bodies in space and time in a way they wouldn't normally.³

Gormley has had a long association with the Australian landscape. In 1989 he made two parallel works: *A Room for the Great Australian Desert* and *Field for the Art Gallery of New South Wales* that dealt with differing notions of interior and exterior space.⁴ Having established an international reputation in the 1980s and 1990s as an artist working in figural sculpture based on castings of his own body, Gormley has recently moved towards sculptural installations such as *Domain Field*, *Allotment I* and *Allotment II* that in various ways have used the bodies of local volunteers.

The Perth International Arts Festival commissioned Gormley to make the *Inside Australia* installation as part of its Golden Anniversary Festival in January – February 2003. Festival events that year extended throughout Western Australia, from Broome

to Albany to Kalgoorlie. To festival director Seán Doran, *Inside Australia* is a work 'specially created for the West Australian landscape'... celebrating 'Perth Festival's newly found reach into the remoteness of its own state'.⁵ He underlines the creative link made between an international arts festival and 'a small and somewhat forgotten West Australian community'. This is a way, not so much of putting the small town of Menzies on the map, but of making a link between a rural community and 'the global art scenes'. *Inside Australia*, a site-specific event, located in one of the more remote parts of the state, was an attempt by the director to bring the Perth International Arts Festival into its interior and by extension, to bring participants in an event 'usually associated with performance, box office and traditional tastes' to a location in the hinterland of Western Australia.⁶

In discussing the site chosen, it is necessary first to distinguish between Lake Ballard – the actual location of the installation – and the small town of Menzies, whose inhabitants were scanned and eventually turned into the *Insider* figures. Menzies is not in fact particularly remote. It lies some 130 kilometres northwest of Kalgoorlie-Boulder, a regional centre with its own airport, linked to Perth by rail and a good



road. However, Menzies does epitomise, both symbolically and in a real sense, the isolated communities of inland Australia. It is an old mining 'ghost town', one of several scattered about the area surrounding Kalgoorlie; towns that were quickly established and grew rapidly in a brief boom period of prosperity following the discovery of gold. Menzies is not just any old dust-blown, forgotten, outback town; it is a place with history and inhabitants who have tried to preserve some of that history over the years. It once had a population of 10,000 but today this has dwindled to around 130 residents and a few public buildings: the town hall and shire office built in 1869, a hotel and the Caltex Roadhouse. At the end of the street there is now a large sign directing the visitor to Lake Ballard. Whilst interested in the town's history, it is clear that Gormley is not using it in any literal way but is more concerned in the Menzies community as it is today. The relative nearness of Menzies to Lake Ballard, the smallness of the Menzies community and Gormley's evident enjoyment in discovering and engaging with it are probably the reasons that initially led him to choose the 'Menzies Mob' as the subjects for his *Insiders* installation. Winning so many of the citizens of Menzies round to the idea took a good deal of gentle coaxing however, and it is a tribute to Gormley's strength of vision that most of the residents were eventually persuaded to take part. Seventy-two of them turned up at the town hall on a cold morning on scanning day, to strip naked and submit to a process that would turn their 'flesh and blood body into a virtual image – a three-dimensional, rotational virtual image, made out of half a million digital coordinates'.⁷ Some of the volunteers found the necessity of taking all their clothes off a little disconcerting, others were somewhat taken aback by the amount of detail revealed by the fifteen-second 'body-maps'. The scans were sent away to Sydney where polystyrene patterns were made. The figures were subsequently cast in a Perth foundry using a stainless steel alloy and transported by road to the site.

The symbolic geography of Lake Ballard

The journey to Lake Ballard, some 55 kilometres beyond Menzies along an unsealed but graded gravel road, through red dirt country of mulga scrub, wattle and eucalypt, offers the visitor a real experience of outback Australia. Lake Ballard is not visible from the road but eventually reveals itself – a flat expanse of dry salt lake – after a short drive down a track. Antony Gormley and his daughter Paloma 'surveyed a vast area of Western Australia'⁸ whilst searching for a suitable site:

When I first came to look for a site in Western Australia, all I knew was that I wanted flatness – a plain earth surface that connected here with there – the intimate with the distant. [Lake Ballard] immediately seemed right because of the strong horizon but also because of the mound near the edge which could be a vantage point from which to view the work. That conical hill was also just removed enough from the edge for its shadowed silhouette to become an anchor for the whole installation.⁹

Flatness, with the unique feature of the conical hill 'island', a natural vantage point from which to look down on the lake and the installation, made Lake Ballard an ideal choice. Once chosen, the geography of the site became increasingly significant to Gormley: 'At first I only wanted flatness but with it came the salt and with the salt the associations of sublimation, purity, silence and perceptually a blinding whiteness'.¹⁰ In planning the installation, Gormley's interest in the ancient geology of Australia became more focused towards the history of mining in the Menzies area, and the material from which the *Insiders* were cast became a way of 'touching the memory of the minerals of the place'.¹¹ The composition of the alloy chosen contains 67 per cent iron, chromium, nickel, molybdenum and 2 per cent trace elements of vanadium and titanium oxide from Lake Ballard. Unpolished, it resembles volcanic rock or ironstone, like the conical hill

(an ironstone intrusion) that acts both as viewing point and 'anchor' for the whole installation (figures 2 and 3). For Gormley, the geography of the location became not only significant but symbolic: 'the location for the balancing act between voids, one at the heart of the continent the other at the furthest remove of self from appearance'.¹²

Gormley's description of Lake Ballard as a void 'at the heart of the continent' has a direct parallel in the descriptions made by early explorers such as British geologist John Walter Gregory who famously wrote of inland Australia as the 'dead heart'.¹³ Indeed the landscape of Lake Ballard – just one of

many dry salt lakes in the area – was selected for its 'extremely white, optically acute, chemical' qualities and their potential to evoke some sense of the interior as empty; void.¹⁴ But to those familiar with Australia's early pioneering history, salt lakes have an additional significance as natural features that embody the disappointment and sheer intractability of the interior as it was first encountered on journeys by explorers such as Ernest Giles in 1872–76.¹⁵ In the Northern Territory Giles discovered and named the vast, dry expanse of Lake Amadeus and in trying to cross it was defeated by the thin crust that broke, sinking men and horses into hot salt mud.

From a hill Giles looked out on the 'wild and weird prospect, with the white bed of the great lake sweeping nearly the whole southern horizon'.¹⁶ Arguably then, Lake Ballard can be read as the archetypal but mythic Australian interior: a void, but on a miniature scale; fulfilling a need to experience the flatness, heat and aridity of Australia's interior whilst remaining accessible on a day trip from Kalgoorlie. Admittedly to the outsider – the art tourist – the location is alien, filmic; a wonderfully satisfying experience, but he/she may be left wondering what significance – if any – the site has to the people of Menzies, a third of whom are estimated to be of indigenous descent. Many of these are Wangkatja of the Wongi group, the traditional owners of the land, although today most of the residents of the shire of Menzies are involved in mining or the now declining pastoral industry.¹⁷



Figure 2 *Insider* (detail), 2003, cast stainless steel alloy. © Antony Gormley. Photograph by Simon Pierse

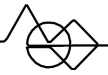


Figure 3 *Insider* and conical hill, 2003. © Antony Gormley. Photograph by Simon Pierse

Figures in a chemical landscape

Even to the casual visitor, unfamiliar with Gormley's work or his international reputation as a sculptor working with the human form, the *Insiders*, viewed in their arid, bleached setting, are an intriguing and moving experience. Standing rigid, like Etruscan statues or the bronzes of Giacometti, the figures bear witness to life, just as Gormley had intended, allowing the visitor to walk amongst them, experiencing a heightened relationship with space and the landscape (figures 4 and 5). They function on many levels but above all as markers in space – articulating the flat expanse of salt lake, allowing us to measure ourselves against the landscape and our passage through it. Like triangulation points, the *Insiders* determine and map our movements across the dry lake surface; walking amongst them in the wind and the heat gives us cause to reflect on the internal and external elements of existence as we live it *through* our own bodies. Gormley says of the *Insiders*: 'every



Figure 4 Antony Gormley, *Insider on Lake Ballard*, 2003, © the artist. Photograph by Simon Pierse

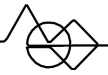
encounter with these objects is an invitation to register through your own body – using it intuitively as an instrument – what the nature of this thing is. How it might be like you, the body you inhabit'.¹⁸

As works of sculpture, the *Insiders* are richly evocative. To Gormley they are figures that evoke 'the spirit of the ancestors, but also something futuristic, so that we are again put into the position of being strangers in a strange land, inhabited by evocations of existing human beings, so that we reconsider our own position'.¹⁹ The identity of each of the 51 inhabitants of Menzies is imbedded in their 'taut abstract' *Insider* shapes; shapes 'formed by the passage of the person's life'.²⁰ Elsewhere Gormley describes them as 'a residue, a kind of concentration of the body...we lost 66 per cent of the mass and retained one third of the body volume, but only in one axis, so these stick figures are the same height as the original person, but vastly reduced laterally'.²¹ The *Insiders* are the result of an 'objective' process and become non-objective representations of individuals and community. But the environment in which they are placed conditions the way in which they are perceived. In the past Gormley has placed similar cast iron *Insiders* in the woods of Sweden,²² but when installed in the shimmering, desert setting of Lake Ballard, the naked, black stick-figures assume new possibilities of meaning, suggesting amongst other things, Aboriginal figures in a harsh primordial environment. "When I looked in the distance" ... one local



Figure 5 Antony Gormley, *Insider on Lake Ballard*, 2003, © the artist. Photograph by Simon Pierse

of Aboriginal descent remarked ... "it looked like real Aboriginal people walking right in the mirage ... like moving".²³ Some 'designed'²⁴ body parts, the elongated penises for instance and the oddly shaped breasts – protruding on stalks like the fruit of the boab tree, native to Western Australia – seem almost fetishistic in appearance (figure 6). In the context of their Australian environment, the *Insiders* invite comparison with a number of diverse indigenous art forms such as the ancient Bradshaw figures of Western Australia, the rock paintings at Laura in Northern Queensland, or the silhouetted,



stick-like figures of nineteenth-century Aboriginal artist Tommy McRae. The location of Lake Ballard, sterile perhaps, but far from inert, conditions the way in which these figures are perceived and invites associations with Australian iconography and history. To Gormley, they could be 'all the people that have set out in Australia for different reasons, either as prospectors or as explorers'.²⁵ The setting also evokes the imagery of films set in the Australian outback such as *Walkabout* or even, as Gormley himself has noted, *Lawrence of Arabia*.²⁶ In particular, the contrived isolation of the *Insiders* and their emaciated forms recall images that have helped define our sense of the Australian interior, such as Russell Drysdale's paintings of Aborigines and outback types. Drysdale's early 1940s canvases depict anorexic characters similarly moulded by the harsh outback environment, in attitudes formed by the passage of their own lives.²⁷

At Lake Ballard Gormley's *Insiders* appear in their element, rooted in the landscape, but do their doppelgängers – the inhabitants of Menzies – belong to it in quite the same way? Hilary Maddocks claims that: 'Despite using local Indigenous people as templates for his sculptures, Gormley makes no comment on them or their particular relationship with Lake Ballard'.²⁸ Ian Tucker, chairman of the Menzies Aboriginal Corporation confessed: 'At first I didn't think much of the nude business ... I've since been to Lake

Ballard four times. I can say "that's my statue over there". It's definitely a spiritual thing for us'.²⁹ Fellow *Insider* Lorraine Williams says 'I think he finally got the meaning of it. It's where Aboriginal people lived and our ancestors belonged, and I suppose we all got the same feeling of belonging to the land'.³⁰ Unlike Gormley's earlier cast iron *Insider* series (1996–9), made without computer technology from his own body, that of his first child and those of relative strangers,³¹ the laser scan process recreates the exact physiognomy of each individual; a methodology that reflects the artist's



Figure 6 Female *Insider*. © Antony Gormley 2003. Photograph by Simon Pierse

personal engagement with the community. The group and individual identity of the 'Menzies Mob' is important, a fact borne out by the *Inside Australia* booklet produced for the Perth Festival which names all 51 participants, several of them members of the same families. But in another sense the *Insiders* represent a more generic community; in Gormley's words: '... asking about our relations with each other: father, sister, lover, rival, enemy, alien and our relationship to territory; home and away'.³²

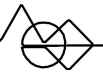
Gormley's two interior spaces

'My hunch', says Gormley, 'is that most Australians don't want to think about the interior. It is full of things, animals, creatures and histories that they would rather not know about'.³³ Elsewhere, in explaining the installation, he states: '*Inside Australia* refers to the interior, the space we never visit'.³⁴ Gormley's interior space is one that works on two levels since the *Insiders* are interior 'representations' of the bodies of a few

Australians, and the space in which they are located is similarly an interior space we (probably would) never visit. In the way that the laser scan and reduction process penetrates beyond the surface of the figure, constructing an imaginary 'core' or centre, the *Insiders* offer us a parallel with our relationship to the Australian landscape. Contrary to Gormley's view, however, the interior, far from being ignored, is in fact often considered to be Australia's essential landscape and we journey into the centre to experience that interior space. Ann McGrath has commented on how "the outback" has become a pivotal cultural symbol of Australia and Australianness; it is central to national mythology'.³⁵ Gormley's installation literally takes us some 800 kilometres away from the city of Perth, near the coast, into 'the outback' of Australia and perhaps that is why the installation is so fulfilling and has proved so popular. Gormley took great care in articulating his chosen interior space, positioning the 51 *Insiders* about 400 metres apart on Lake Ballard, in sight of but in isolation from each



Figure 7 View over Lake Ballard from conical hill. Photograph by Simon Pierse



other, conscious that 'one work should not face another'. To coincide with the dates of the Perth festival, Gormley designed the *Insiders* to be seen in the blinding whiteness of dry summer. His intention was that they should stand out on the lake's flat, white encrusted surface like 'antennae in space; in relationship to each other but also with the land and the limit of our perception: the horizon'. But at other times of year, particularly after heavy rain, the lake bed is brown, sticky clay or even partly submerged beneath a few inches of water. From the top of the conical hill that Gormley intended as a viewing point, depending on weather conditions that affect the condition of the lake surface, the *Insiders* appear 'connected' to each other by paths of footprints trodden into the lake surface (figure 7). Like a map of inland Australia showing the lines of roads and railways that link sparse human settlements, the *Insiders* are joined to each other by lines of human communication. The spiritual dimension to the visitors' interaction with the *Insiders* is also suggested in these trails; they are like appropriated *Tjukurrpa* paths, the sacred 'songlines' that crisscross the region and which are Aboriginal knowledge and belief system written in the land.³⁶

The developing pilgrimage to *Inside Australia*

Since its inception, *Inside Australia* has greatly increased the number of visitors to Menzies and Lake Ballard. Gormley sees it as 'an excuse for coming here and thinking about this place and the people who dwell in it. I would like this to be, just in a modest way, another place that people go to look at and wonder'.³⁷ During the festival, *Inside Australia* attracted many visitors: mainly Australians from the metropolitan area of Perth and international visitors, about a third of whom were from the United Kingdom. In the first three weeks of March 2003, a fortnight after the festival closed, 750 vehicles

made the journey up to Lake Ballard to see the installation. Festival organisers decided that it should remain for a further six months and there are now plans to leave it permanently in place and to complete the installation as Gormley had originally intended it. Since its installation, an average of 500 cars per month have visited the site and the success of *Inside Australia* has prompted the Perth Festival organisers to plan another landscape-based art installation for regional Western Australia in 2006. Meanwhile *Inside Australia* promises to be another destination in the Australian landscape offering the visitor something of a pilgrimage into the interior, alongside Purnululu (Bungle Bungle) and Wave Rock, both relatively inaccessible but established sites in Western Australia. Uluru (Ayers Rock), in the Northern Territory, is undoubtedly the most famous of those natural features in Australia where people go to look and wonder and like Uluru, *Inside Australia* is now on the itinerary of tour companies offering champagne sundowners and candlelit suppers in the desert. There are plans for a field house at the lake's edge but so far visitor numbers have been limited by the lack of facilities at the site. To Gormley, *Inside Australia* is 'an attempt at the sublime, to engage with big sky, big space, time beyond mind and space, beyond the limits of perception'.³⁸ Tour companies operating in the area emphasise this sublime aspect of the experience and the importance of seeing the sculptures in the light of dawn or dusk. Campers at the lake's edge have even commented on an eerie whispering sound coming from the figures at night – as if they were conversing amongst themselves.³⁹ No doubt this is just another myth of the interior but it only serves to strengthen the cult of pilgrimage that is growing up around Antony Gormley's installation at Lake Ballard; work that the artist describes as 'the most difficult, long-distance, intense, exhilarating, fatiguing endeavour of my life – and the most rewarding'.⁴⁰

- 1 Fred Williams, Australian painter (1927–82), quoted in Haynes, R, *Seeking the Centre, The Australian Desert in Literature, Art and Film*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998: 167–171. See also McGrath, S & Olsen, J, *The Artist and the Desert*, Sydney: Bay Books, 1981: 110.
- 2 Cole, I, 'The Relation Between Thought and Matter: A Conversation with Antony Gormley', *Sculpture*, 22 (3), April 2003: 5, <http://www.sculpture.org/documents/scmag03/apr03/gormley/gor.htm>.
- 3 Gormley and Cole: 5.
- 4 Speaking of the *Inside Australia* project Gormley says: 'This whole story started back in New South Wales in 1989 when I had to dig the foundations for the *A Room for the Great Australian Desert*'. See Gormley in *Inside Australia*, a film directed by Hugh Brody, for Thunderbox in association with Artemis International for Five, 2003.
- 5 Doran, S, 'From the Festival Director', *Inside Australia* (official booklet), Perth International Arts Festival, 2003, (no pagination).
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Gormley, who is quoted here in the transcript of a short on-line video, gives the number of digital co-ordinates as 30, 000. However, I assume the half a million figure given in the official booklet *Inside Australia* to be correct. See O'Donnell, M, 17.7.2002, 'Goldfields' salt lake inspires British artist' (transcript), <http://www.abc.net.au/7.30/s609869.htm>.
- 8 Gormley and Cole: 5.
- 9 Gormley, A, 'From the Artist', *Inside Australia* (official booklet), Perth International Arts Festival, 2003, (no pagination).
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Gormley, *Inside Australia* (film).
- 12 Gormley, A, 'From the Artist', *Inside Australia* (booklet).
- 13 See Gregory, JW, *The Dead Heart of Australia: A Journey Around Lake Eyre in the Summer of 1901–02*, London: John Murray, 1906.
- 14 Gormley and Cole: 5.
- 15 By coincidence, Giles passed through the area very near to where the town of Menzies is now on an expedition to Central South and Western Australia.
- 16 Giles, E, *Australia Twice Traversed*, London: 'Sampson Low, Marston, Searle & Rivington, 1889, Vol 1: 98–99.
- 17 Maddocks, H, 'Antony Gormley *Inside Australia*', *Art Monthly Australia*, May 2003, 159: 3–5.
- 18 'Mud Upwards', an interview between Martin Gayford and Antony Gormley in *Modern Painters*, 16 (1), Spring 2003: 22–25.
- 19 Gormley and Cole: 5.
- 20 Gormley, A, *Inside Australia* (booklet).
- 21 Ibid.
- 22 See Hutchinson, John, Gombrich, EH, Njatin Lela B & Mitchell, WJT, *Antony Gormley* (expanded edition), London: Phaidon, 2000 and later: 175.
- 23 *Inside Australia* (film).
- 24 See Hutchinson, Gombrich, Njatin and Mitchell: 160.
- 25 *Inside Australia* (film).
- 26 Gormley compares the setting to a moment in the film *Lawrence of Arabia*. See O'Donnell, <http://www.abc.net.au/7.30/s609869.htm>.
- 27 See Haynes: 167–171.
- 28 Maddocks: 5.
- 29 Hoy, A, 'Lonely Arts', *Ninemsn Bulletin*, <http://bulletin.ninemsn.com.au/bulletin/eddesk.nsf/All/9055DF18DC84E5A8CA256D2C0020E73A> : 2.
- 30 <http://abcasiapacific.com/englishbites/stories/s855617.htm> : 2.
- 31 See Hutchinson, Gombrich, Njatin and Mitchell: 160–1.
- 32 Gormley, A, *Inside Australia* (booklet).
- 33 *Inside Australia* (film).
- 34 Antony Gormley, *Inside Australia* (booklet).
- 35 McGrath, Ann, 'Travels to a Distant Past: The Mythology of the Outback', in *Australian Cultural History*, No 10, *Travellers, Journeys and Tourists*, Victoria: 1991: 113–124.
- 36 See Muir, K, 'A Dreamtime Nightmare: Aboriginal Culture & Whitemen Mining', in *Aboriginal Australia & the Torres Strait Islands Guide to Indigenous Australia*, Melbourne, Oakland, London and Paris: Lonely Planet Publications, 2001: 398–9.
- 37 Barber, B, 14.3.2003, 'Antony Gormley's desert statues', ABC Goldfields web page, <http://www.abc.net.au/goldfields/stories/s806941.htm> : 2.
- 38 *Antony Gormley – Inside Australia at Lake Ballard*, Perth Visual Arts Festival (2003) web page, http://www.perthfestival.com.au/2003_archive/AntonyGormleyInsideAustraliaAtLakeBallard.html
- 39 The whisper is caused by a small hollow passage, left by the casting between the neck and the small of the back of each figure, that traps the breeze on the salt lake. See Hoy, A, 'Lonely Arts', *Ninemsn Bulletin*.
- 40 Ibid.